



Gainesville

Research Enhancement Award Program

Director: Paul M. Hoffman, MD

Executive Summary for Fiscal Year 2008

The mission of the Rehabilitation Outcomes Research Center for Veterans with Neurological Impairment (RORC) Research Enhancement Award Program (REAP) is to conduct interdisciplinary research that improves the health, function, and community reintegration of post-deployed veterans and veterans with neurological impairment.

Rehabilitation and the management of disability and illness are dominant themes in the VA strategic vision. The first VA strategic and enabling goal is to "restore the capability of veterans with disabilities to the greatest extent possible and improve the quality of their lives and that of their families." The first objective of this goal is to "maximize the physical, mental, and social functioning of veterans with disabilities and be a leader in providing specialized health care services." The RORC-REAP mission directly addresses these VA priorities through research that improves the quality of rehabilitation services and outcomes. RORC-REAP investigators study how to improve the access, design, administration, management, and cost of rehabilitation care; use state of the science methodologies to develop new and more precise measures across the continuum of care; and evaluate innovative technology, systems, and processes of care through the continuum. They focus on the psychosocial aspects of recovery, informal caregiving, extension of rehabilitation and specialty care, and community reintegration.

The North Florida/South Georgia Veterans Health System is uniquely positioned to build integrated and productive programs in rehabilitation outcomes research. The coalescence of expertise and talent among neuroscientists, interdisciplinary rehabilitation researchers, health services researchers, clinicians, and social scientists at the RORC-REAP, the RR&D Brain Rehabilitation Research Center of Excellence, the Geriatric Research Education and Clinical Center, and the University of Florida (UF) provide access to unusually strong and innovative research programs aimed at improving VA rehabilitation care. The UF College of Public Health and Health Professions combines traditional rehabilitation and public health programs to foster collaborations among public health, health services, and the health professions to address the multifaceted health needs of populations, communities, and individuals. The UF Rehabilitation Science Doctoral program trains graduate students to address the need for faculty in the rehabilitation disciplines. This pool of young rehabilitation scholars provides the RORC with access to potential career development awardees and investigators interested in rehabilitation outcomes research in the VA.

Over the past fiscal year, RORC leadership focused on building capacity by recruiting clinician investigators. We invested in pilot studies to promote new merit-review submissions, explored new opportunities for clinical research in rehabilitation and disability, and laid the foundation for collaboration with the new Emerging Pathogens Institute at UF. Additionally, a new field-based center in Gainesville funded by the VA Office of Public Health and Environmental Hazards (VA Center for Occupational Safety and Infection Control), the Multiple Sclerosis Center of Excellence in Baltimore, and partnering with the VHA Rural Health Resource Center - Eastern Region further expanded our network of collaborators. A new RORC focus area, Technology and Telehealth, was created to promote and support scientific investigation on the effects of telecommunication technologies on the quality, outcomes and cost utility of health care practices. Major goals of this new workgroup are to foster an environment for developing and evaluating technology-based solutions for solving patient care problems and to develop and disseminate information on the science and practice of tele-rehabilitation.

Using the depth and breadth of expertise available in the community, the RORC is positioned to strengthen

existing outcome evaluation methods and measures in rehabilitation outcomes research. Through our local and regional collaborations, as well as national collaborations with the Office of Rural Health, Office of Public Health and Environmental Hazards, QUERI, the National Rehabilitation Program Office for Clinical Care and participation and leadership in non-VA organizations, our findings will continue to improve the quality of rehabilitation programs for veterans with disability and influence future health and rehabilitation policy.